

LIFESTYLE

Son of Hjh Maimunah's founder starts own nasi padang stall after prison, wants to make it more affordable



PHOTO: AsiaOne/Melissa Teo

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By **MELISSA TEO**

To many, the idea of doing time in prison is a harrowing one.

And on the other hand, there is Ismail Didih Ibrahim, who said he actually missed his time in the slammer after he got out.

Don't get him wrong though— the 38-year-old entrepreneur has no intentions of doing anything to land himself back in jail.

But sadly, his four months in a cell was the only time he has had a proper break in a long time, he told AsiaOne when we visited his social enterprise coffee shop stall, The People's Nasi Padang, on a Wednesday afternoon (Oct 18).

Didih started the stall at Tai Seng in July this year after getting out of jail earlier in January.

For The People's Nasi Padang, he aims to hire ex-convicts, as a way of giving them another chance.

Apart from this new venture, he also owns a Muslim-friendly yakiniku stall next door called Ryo Yakiniku, which opened in December 2021.

To run or not to run the family business?

Before his own F&B ventures, he used to help run his family business - the award-winning Hjh Maimunah Restaurant and Catering - with his parents and three sisters.

Didih worked with his family for 20 years and when he was a kid, he used to help out at the stall while still attending school.

But he didn't know if he wanted to do this for the rest of his life and the doubts took an even larger toll on him during the pandemic.

"My life was in limbo for two years. I couldn't travel because of Covid-19. And I didn't know if I could commit to [the family business]."

So, he started Ryo Yakiniku with a small capital to get a feel of what it's like to be his own boss.

It was so successful he opened a second outlet at Gambas Crescent, which opened in April 2022.

Was prison a blessing in disguise?

However, in the midst of running his two stalls, he was sentenced to jail in September 2022 [for setting fire to his former wife's house](#).

During the circuit breaker period in 2020, he had thrown a bottle of flammable liquid with a burning cloth wick at her house and sprayed "owe money, pay money" on the property.

And though it was a dark period in his life, Didih chose to look at it in a positive light.

"I guess it was like destiny because I really enjoyed my time inside prison. For me, it was a good break from the outside world," Didih told us frankly.

Being away from outside world distractions not only afforded him a break, but also enabled him to recover from burnout and improve his mental health. While inside, he managed to find ways to destress.

"I'm someone who works pretty much the whole day, the only time I don't work is when I sleep. So when I was inside jail, there were no phones, I could finally get enough sleep, read my favourite books, play sports and just hang out with the guys.

In fact, when he eventually got out in January earlier this year, he didn't feel happy.

"Actually, I fell into depression for a while when I came out, weird right?" he told us with a chuckle.

Changing other ex-convicts' lives

Apart from recharging in jail, Didih also got the chance to meet and interact with many other convicts from different walks of life.

"When I was in prison for those couple of months, I had the opportunity to talk to people, to mix with people who [I] don't normally hang out with.

"And when I listen to their stories, especially the ones who keep going in and out of jail, I realised that their challenges are the same — they didn't have a positive environment, they didn't receive any encouragement from the people closest to them, they had an abusive childhood," Didih said.

That was when he realised that he could help these ex-convicts.

"I was thinking, what if I could give them a skill. And I think cooking is a skill that you can bring anywhere you go," he explained.

"Eventually, if these people go and work for someone else, they have something to offer, they can develop a skillset, or maybe one day, they can even open their own business."

Currently, Didih has two ex-convicts working for him, who only want to be known as JR and Mamat (not their real names).



Didih and his staff serving customers at the stall. PHOTO: AsiaOne/Melissa Teo

JR has been in and out of jail for around 20 years.

Didih met him at Brotherhood, a support group for men who have caused hurt to others by Thye Hua Kwan Moral Society.

"I knew he needed a job and it just so happened that I wanted to start The People's Nasi Padang, so I pulled him in," he shared.

On the other hand, Mamat has been in and out of jail for 10 years and used to work for Didih's neighbour.

"He wasn't doing very well there. I didn't think that he wasn't doing well because he's not a good employee, I just thought that he wasn't being managed well," shared Didih.

Mamat was first hired for Ryo Yakiniku over a year ago, and was transferred to The People's Nasi Padang recently.

"He showed a lot of interest in cooking. When he was at Ryo Yakiniku, he would experiment on different kinds of cuisines," shared Didih.

"Then I figured, [if] he has the interest, so why not I teach him."

Just like what he did with Ryo Yakiniku, Didih plans to expand The People's Nasi Padang, and hire more ex-convicts.

The menu is similar to Hjh Maimunah

Those familiar with Hjh Maimunah would spot some familiar looking dishes at The People's Nasi Padang.

Didih confirms with us that many of the dishes are "exactly the same", which isn't surprising since he shares the same central

kitchen as them. But he also is trying to "change things up" to make their menu a little different from Hjh Maimunah.

For instance, he observed that some in Singapore don't enjoy food that is super spicy. So, he's trying to create some milder options.

He also realised that generally, people are consuming more vegetables and side dishes, so he's adding more of those to the menu.

Making nasi padang affordable

Besides more dish variety and options, he's also trying to make nasi padang prices more affordable.

"How I keep the prices down is by focusing on the basics of nasi padang," he explained.

For instance, instead of selling pricey proteins like barbequed chicken and barbecued fish, he sticks to fundamental ones like beef, chicken, and more affordable variations of fish.



The sumptuous spread of dishes at The People's Nasi Padang.

PHOTO: AsiaOne/Melissa Teo

He also insisted that no matter how much rice one orders, the price is fixed at 50 cents per serving as it is considered a "basic necessity".

Apart from that, for transparency sake, he also listed all the prices down on a board outside his stall.

"People always complain that nasi padang prices are very random, and no one ever knows how they they have to pay," he elaborated.

Of course, after hearing so much about Didih's nasi padang (and smelling all those incredible aromas wafting from his stall), I had to try the food for myself.

Trying the food for myself

I personally am a huge fan of Hjh Maimunah's nasi padang, so I wanted to see if it was similar.

The queues outside The People's Nasi Padang started around the time I began my interview with Didih at 11.30am.

And during this time, there was not one moment where there wasn't a snaking line of people at the stall.

By the time I finished speaking to Didih - which was about 40 minutes later - some of the dishes had already been wiped out.

So, I acted fast and got what I could before everything was gone.

One of the dishes Didih recommended to me was the sotong hitam (squid in black ink), so I had to get it.

I also got the sambal goreng - a nasi padang staple, in my opinion - and sayur lodeh (tofu with vegetables in a mild coconut-based gravy).



My delicious plate of nasi padang. PHOTO: AsiaOne/Melissa Teo

One concern when it comes to sotong is it having a rubbery, hard-to-chew texture. So, I was pleased to find that it wasn't the case with the sotong here.

In fact, the squid here was tender and I could easily cut through it with even a fork.

Sayur lodeh is a dish I grew up eating and The People's Nasi Padang does an excellent rendition of this classic.

The gravy was light but well-seasoned and the vegetables had been cooked to a nice softness that it broke apart effortlessly.

It's hard to go wrong with sambal goreng and the one from The People's Nasi Padang tasted just like the one from Hjh Maimunah — spicy with a slight sweetness. And of course, all that texture from the long beans and beancurd made it all the more better.

I also really wanted to try their eggplant dish but the last serving had been swiped away before my very eyes. But that just gives me an excuse to come back next time.

Address: 61 Tai Seng Ave, Singapore 534167

Opening hours: Monday to Thursday, 8am to 3pm, Closed on Saturdays and Sundays

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